

ANNUAL REPORT FY 2020 - 2021

VICTIM SERVICES ADVISORY BOARD



ADVOCATING FOR VICTIMS OF CRIMES

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Message from Chairs.....	1
VSAB Mission Statement.....	2
VSAB Mandate	2
Meeting and Membership	3
<i>Meetings</i>	
<i>Membership</i>	
The COVID-19 Pandemic	8
Victim Advocate Program Highlights.....	9
<i>Priorities</i>	
<i>Activity Highlights</i>	
Priority: Bridge Housing for Victims of Domestic Violence.....	11
<i>Goals</i>	
<i>Background</i>	
<i>Bridge Housing and Case Management Request</i>	
Priority: Increased Funding and Expansion of Services for Domestic Violence Offender Groups	19
<i>Goals</i>	
<i>Background</i>	
<i>Funding and Expansion of Services</i>	
Priority: Increased Staff for Victim Services Programs.....	21
<i>Goals</i>	
<i>Background and Priority Status</i>	
Priority: Policy Change on Forensic Exams for Rape and Sexual Assault Victims	23
<i>Goal</i>	
<i>Background and Priority Status</i>	
Legislative Affairs Report.....	24
Public Education and Outreach Report.....	27
Looking Forward FY22 and FY23.....	29

MESSAGE FROM OUR CHAIRS

Dear County Executive Elrich and County Council Members:

The Victim Services Advisory Board ("VSAB" or "Board") is pleased to present its FY 2020-2021 annual report. Like everything else over the past year or more, this report's year's initiatives and priorities were informed by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, throughout that once-in-a-century event, the Board's initiatives and priorities have continued to focus on adapting the Board's mission to this unique moment, providing best practices, advising on policy to administration officials, and helping advocate for legislation that is in the best interest of victims.

The VSAB will continue to dedicate its time to identifying the needs of crime victims and ensuring that these needs are being met, considering our County's current financial constraints. In addition, the VSAB will continue to recognize the importance of community and the provision of quality services to crime victims, centering on the notion that our county government has a responsibility to provide sufficient funding to serve crime victims.

Moving forward, the VSAB will continue to provide both the County Executive and the County Council with recommendations on how to best meet the needs of crime victims and their families in Montgomery County. We make it our mission to serve this community. On behalf of the members of the VSAB, we respectfully share our report with your office.

Sincerely,

Kathryn Pontzer, JD, LL.M.

Juanita Rogers, MS, CHES®



VSAB MISSION STATEMENT

The Victim Services Advisory Board (VSAB) supports Montgomery County's commitment to serving crime victim and their families. These crimes include rape, domestic violence (DV), sexual assault, homicide, adults molested as children, terrorism, hate violence, human trafficking, robbery, driving while intoxicated (DWI), vehicular manslaughter, assault, battery, burglary, arson, larceny, stalking, carjacking, harassment, vandalism, and bullying.

MANDATE

The Board must periodically:

- ♦ Review available services and facilities for victims and their families; Determine the needs of victims and families, which includes services and programs.

Submit at least one report annually to the County Executive and County Council on the progress of programs intended to assist victims and their families, and actions needed to improve those programs: and Make recommendations for appropriate allocation of funds in accordance with priorities and the consideration of financial resources.

VSAB MEETINGS AND MEMBERSHIP

MEETINGS



The Board meets the fourth Thursday of each month from 6:30 p.m. to 8:30 p.m. at the office of the Montgomery County Department of Health and Human Services, 1301 Piccard Drive Rockville, MD, 20850. The Board does not meet in August and combines its November and December sessions into one meeting held the first Thursday in December. All meetings are open to the public.

While social distancing restrictions are in place for the Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) pandemic, the Board will meet virtually using Microsoft Teams or Zoom.



MEMBERSHIP



Neda Bolourian, JD
Board member since 2019

"I am proud to be a member of the Victims Services Advisory Board because I have the opportunity to work with professionals who deeply care about their work and the citizens of our great county. I am inspired by all the good work that gets done in this group and hope that we can continue to make a positive impact."



Quintaria Brunson
Board member since 2019



Briganty-Vidal, LCSW
Board member since 2018

"I work in the community as a mental health therapist and realized that many of my clients are also in need of support of victims services and being a part of this board allows me to also advocate for them."





Lawrence Center, JD

Board Member since 2021

"I joined the Board to return to my career roots, having worked in criminal justice after law school and having served for years as a volunteer with the County Sexual Assault Service, Abused Persons Program and Community Crisis Center."



Ronald Cohen

Board member since 2017

"I sought the position so I could continue helping trauma victims recover and resume safe, normal lives"



Amos Hicks III

Board Member since 2019

"The best way to not feel hopeless is to get up and do something. Don't wait for good things to happen to you. If you go out and make some good things happen, you will fill the world with hope, you will fill yourself with hope." - Barack Obama



Brian Koosed, JD

Board Member since 2019

"I was interested in finding a way to support and help victims in the community, based on personal experience and my work as a lawyer."



Jessica J. Leslie

Board Member since 2019

"I have dedicated my career to supporting victims of violence, and I joined the board to advocate for those in my community."

MEMBERSHIP



April Marrone, PhD, MBA

Board member since 2017

(co-chair between June 2018 - June 2020)

"I joined the VSAB to help my community be even stronger."



Kathryn Pontzer, JD, LL.M.

Board member since January 2018

Co-chair July 2020 - present

"As a member of the VSAB, I want to use my experience in government relations to continue to build on the community supports needed for victims of crimes."



Juanita Rogers, MS, CHES

Board member since 2019

Co-chair July 2020 - present

"I joined the Victim Services Advisory Board (VSAB) to help my local community while amplifying the voices of and advocating for victims and survivors of crime."



Leah Schwartz, MSW, LCSW-C

Board member since 2018

"I joined the Victim Services Advisory Board to advocate for the victims of crime in our community, and to increase awareness and education within the community about what resources are already available. I want to be a voice for additional victim services and to help empower individuals to be the voice for themselves."



Reem Sharaf, LMSW

Board member since 2017

"As a member of the VSAB, I am committed to amplifying the voices of victims and survivors of crime in Montgomery County, and centering their needs in the county's political agenda. "

MEMBERSHIP



Robin Stimson, MSW

Board member since 2016

(co-chair June 2018 - June 2020)

"I have always felt a passionate connection to victims and individuals affected by trauma. I believe we all have the power and opportunity to give a voice to the voiceless."



David Young

Board Member since 2021

"My professional life is devoted to addressing violent conflict abroad, and I came to believe it was just as important to join VSAB and do the same in my own community."

****members resigned during this reporting period**

Ex-Officio, Non-Voting Members

Ellen Alexander (Montgomery County Police)

VACANT (Office of Public Defender)

Rebecca Marcolini (State's Attorney's Office)

Dolores Briceno (State's Attorney's Office)

Nadja Cabello (HHS/Trauma Services)

Dr. Rafiah H. Prince (HHS/Trauma Services)

VACANT (Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation)

VACANT (Criminal Justice Coordinating Committee)

THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC



The defining event of this reporting period has certainly been the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has impacted the Board's work during this reporting period, much like it has impacted everything else in the County and throughout the United States. Victims have faced additional challenges because of the COVID-19 pandemic. These challenges have included:

- ♦ Increased instances of domestic violence victims being subject to stay at home orders that may have forced them to remain in close proximity with their abusers;
- ♦ Increased rates of violent crime and homicides, perhaps due to the closing of schools and other support systems.
- ♦ Increased demand for County services benefiting victims; and
- ♦ Added health risks and other barriers associated with seeking assistance.

The increased need for victim services during the pandemic is illustrated by available data. For example, there was a [91%] increase in Intakes from 2019 to 2020. The severity of cases has also become more critical, with a drastic increases in homicides, domestic violence, sexual violence, and more reports of strangulations.

As discussed below, the Board has attempted to meet the unique challenges presented during this reporting period with an increased emphasis on its core mission: tireless advocacy for victims at all levels of government throughout the County and State. This has included regularly liaising with members of the County Council, with the County Executive, with County Council and County Executive staff, and with the County's delegation to the State legislature. Therefore, this reporting period has seen a substantial increase in the Board's community outreach and its legislative advocacy, all with an eye toward helping victims navigate this unprecedented crisis.

VICTIM ADVOCATE PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS



PRIORITIES

The Board emphasized several priorities throughout this reporting period:

- ♦ Bridge and permanent housing for victims of domestic violence transitioning from the Betty Ann Krahne (BAK) Domestic Violence shelter;
- ♦ Budget funding increase and expansion of services for domestic violence offender groups.
- ♦ County policy change on forensic exams for rape and sexual assault victims;
- ♦ filling of vacant positions needed by victim services programs;
- ♦ Creation of a victim services directory; and
- ♦ Ongoing support of non-governmental agencies and nonprofits advocating for victims.

ACTIVITY HIGHLIGHTS

The Board has been busy advocating throughout this reporting period. Activities designed to share the Board's priorities included:

- ♦ Meeting with County Executive Marc Elrich;
- ♦ Meeting with County Council Vice President and Chair of the Health and Human Services Committee, Gabe Albornoz;
- ♦ Meeting with Council Members and Members of the Health and Human Services Committee, Evan Glass and Craig Rice;
- ♦ Meeting with Councilmember and Chair of the Public Safety Committee, Sidney Katz;
- ♦ Meeting with the staff of County Council President Tom Hucker and Councilmembers Will Jawando and Nancy Navarro;
- ♦ Testifying at the County Council Health and Human Services Committee Policy Meeting and the County Council Budget Hearings;

ACTIVITY HIGHLIGHTS continued...

- ♦ Presenting to the Domestic Violence Coordinating Council (DVCC);
- ♦ Meeting with Jessica Volz, Director, Shady Grove Medical Center's Forensic Medical Unit (FMU), Debbie Feinstein, Chief of the Special Victims Unit, Montgomery County's State's Attorney's Office and Tom Manion, Director, Family Justice Center;
- ♦ Meeting with Dr. Raymond Crowel, the Director of Montgomery County Department of Health and Human Services (HHS);
- ♦ Meeting with Dr. Rolando Santiago, Chief of HHS Behavioral Health and Crisis Services;
- ♦ Reporting at Montgomery County DHHS Director's Quarterly Leadership Meeting with Boards, Commissions and Committees;
- ♦ Attending meetings with the Criminal Justice Coordinating Commission (CJCC);
- ♦ Meeting with Lisae Jordan, Esq, Executive Director and Counsel, Maryland Coalition Against Sexual Assault (MCASA) on legislative priorities;
- ♦ Submitting statements to the Maryland Senate Judicial Proceeding Committee, Senate Budget and Taxation Committee, House Judiciary Committee and House Appropriations Committee in support of legislation that can improve the lives of crime victims;
- ♦ Submitting statements to the Montgomery County Council supporting legislation regulating ghost guns and expanding police data reports on community policing; and
- ♦ Sending a letter to Governor Larry Hogan requesting that he make helping victims of crime a top priority when determining how to maximize the use of funds from the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021.



PRIORITY: BRIDGE HOUSING FOR VICTIMS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

GOALS

The VSAB maintains the following goals addressing this priority:

1. Establish a plan to ensure safe, one-year bridge housing to end homelessness for domestic violence victims so that they can become self-sufficient survivors.
2. Increase access to permanent housing, including improving the Vulnerability Index (VI-SPDAT) point system for domestic violence victims; and
3. Allocate funding for in-depth and targeted case management.

BACKGROUND

The Betty Ann Krahne shelter, also known as BAK, is Montgomery County's domestic violence shelter. BAK is intended for emergency and short-term stays for domestic violence, trafficking, and rape

victims. It is a lifeline for survivors who are fleeing violence. The shelter was established to provide immediate safety and case management to assist trauma survivors with safety planning, and other necessary services. Research data shows that survivors who access shelter services and follow through on the program's recommendations are less likely to be re-assaulted or killed. The maximum stay at BAK is 60 days; however, some clients require extensions to accomplish their initial goals for a safe discharge.



Survivors who are discharged from the program often move in with family or friends. Some access homeless services and some rent their own housing.

Unfortunately, the County suffers from a lack of affordable housing options for this population. Bridge housing, which is the most appropriate option for survivors needing additional time to resolve their homelessness, is not adequately offered.

BACKGROUND

Priority: Bridge Housing for Victims of Domestic Violence



- ♦ The County also lacks the necessary intensive case management services for survivors who need continuous support to address long-term safety planning and to move toward a future free from violence.
- ♦ BAK was designed as an emergency shelter targeting high-risk victims who are at imminent risk of harm and domestic violence-related high-risk lethality. Its capacity has increased to 60 beds to accommodate the growing County population of domestic violence victims. Providing continuous openings to these victims is necessary to prevent the potential for homicide or serious re-assault. When victims are not able to find appropriate housing accommodations and remain at BAK for an extended period, they prevent higher-risk or immediate-danger victims from gaining access to safe shelter. When BAK is full, victims seeking shelter are placed in motels. To create space for high-risk individuals at BAK, lower risk victims who could benefit from transitional housing are placed into motels for 30 days, so they can continue seeking remedies for their homelessness. Motels, however, do not provide childcare or meals, making it almost impossible for these victims to continue pursuing their independence goals. Motels also do not offer ongoing case management and safety planning. This increases victims' risk for danger and re-assault. Specifically, the most up-to-date annual data shows that:
 - ♦ BAK serves ~200 domestic violence victims.
 - ♦ 8-12% of discharged victims need Montgomery County emergency services and are housed in motels. This means ~20-30 victims -and potentially their children.
 - ♦ Approximately 5% of discharged victims return to their abuser. This refers to ~10 victims.
 - ♦ Domestic violence victims cannot be protected from their abusers while staying in motels or after they move from one family member's residence to the next. When victims are unable to receive needed services and support, they sometimes return to their abusers to prevent further homelessness.

BACKGROUND

Priority: Bridge Housing for Victims of Domestic Violence

Included is the BAK discharge summary for FY18-FY20 (Tables 1-3).

Table 1: BAK Disposition Summary FY21

Code	Disposition	Count	Percent
1	MoCo Emergency Svcs (Motel/short term)	18	7%
2	Family/Friend	86	33%
3	Return to Abuser	4	2%
5	Home with Protective Order	30	12%
6	Transitional	6	2%
7	New Home	34	13%
8	Treatment/Shelter	19	7%
9	Unknown	20	8%
10	Other	1	8%
11	Unfavorable Discharge	15	6%
12	Inappropriate Referral	7	3%
13	Didn't stay at shelter, bed held	19	7%
Total clients w/disposition codes		259	100%

BACKGROUND

Priority: Bridge Housing for Victims of Domestic Violence

Included is the BAK discharge summary for FY18-FY20 (Tables 1-3).

Table 2: BAK Disposition Summary FY2020

Code	Disposition	Count	Percent
1	MoCo Emergency Svcs (Motel/short term)	17	11%
2	Family/Friend	47	31%
3	Return to Abuser	3	2%
5	Home with Protective Order	13	9%
6	Transitional	4	3%
7	New Home	17	11%
8	Treatment/Shelter	9	6%
9	Unknown	13	9%
10	Other	1	1%
11	Unfavorable Discharge	10	7%
12	Inappropriate Referral	7	5%
13	Didn't stay at shelter, bed held	9	6%
Total clients w/disposition codes		150	94%

*Of 158 total adult clients, there is a disposition code for 150

BACKGROUND

Priority: Bridge Housing for Victims of Domestic Violence

Included is the BAK discharge summary for FY18-FY20 (Tables 1-3).

Table 3: BAK Disposition Summary FY2019

Code	Disposition	Count	Percent
1	MoCo Emergency Svcs (Motel/short term)	21	11%
2	Family/Friend	52	28%
3	Return to Abuser	5	3%
5	Home with Protective Order	13	7%
6	Transitional	4	2%
7	New Home	29	16%
8	Treatment/Shelter	14	7%
9	Unknown	19	10%
10	Other	0	0%
11	Unfavorable Discharge	19	10%
12	Inappropriate Referral	2	1%
13	Didn't stay at shelter, bed held	9	5%
Total clients w/disposition codes		187	95%*

*Of 200 total adult clients, there is a disposition code for 187

BACKGROUND

Priority: Bridge Housing for Victims of Domestic Violence



The high cost of living in Montgomery County, including childcare, coupled with typically low-level job skills, make survivors highly vulnerable to further victimization, loss of employment, and chronic homelessness. Victims leaving BAK often do not qualify or take precedence for transitional and permanent low-cost housing. They also face an average wait for housing vouchers of two to five years. Moreover, when using the Vulnerability Index (VI-SPDAT), a widely recognized tool for determining the need for housing assistance in Montgomery County, domestic violence victims receive just a one-point priority. Additionally, some victims have not qualified for the Rapid Rehousing Program due to lack of stable employment, poor credit, or a criminal record. Changing the County's existing policy concerning domestic violence victims and the VI-SPDAT Vulnerability Index point system used would help to close the service gap between those discharged from BAK and those that qualify for County housing assistance.

Victims may face additional barriers to affordable housing due to their poor credit and legal problems stemming from the abuse. Some victims might also have pending immigration cases that prevent them from seeking lawful employment.

Furthermore, many housing programs do not favor survivors because of fears that they will bring problems or will make the community unsafe.

Finally, most survivors do not qualify for permanent supportive housing services, which require a documented permanent disability. Although survivors often suffer from mental illness related to domestic violence, including depression, substance abuse and PTSD, these conditions are not perceived as serious barriers to housing by authorities. Consequently, these victims do not meet the criteria for permanent supportive housing and are left with no alternative except to live with relatives or friends. They can also find themselves and their children frequently moving to avoid their abusers. This is a daunting prospect that poses many risks, especially for young mothers with large families. Even the most resilient victims are at risk for homelessness or returning to abusers.

Unfortunately, many of these victims end up back at BAK after being re-victimized.

BRIDGE HOUSING & CASE MANAGEMENT REQUEST

Priority: Bridge Housing for Victims of Domestic Violence



Finding bridge housing and/or a system for prioritizing DV victims' access to long-term housing has been the Board's top priority since FY14.

The Board advocates for bridge housing programs serving young female-headed households most vulnerable to the effects of domestic violence that would:

1. help break the cycle of violence and dependency,
2. deliver supportive case management services,
3. afford victims time to build needed life skills (e.g., education, GED, vocational, parenting),
4. provide increased trauma recovery and empowerment, and
5. offer a resolution of housing barriers (e.g., legal problems, identifying appropriate long-term housing).

The VSAB began to explore the options available for both bridge and permanent housing in its general meetings. An appointed task force met with County leaders to discuss transitional housing options and strategies. In FY15, as a pilot project, homes on Fleet Street in downtown Rockville were intended to be renovated and used for bridge housing for domestic violence victims and their families. Case work was provided by a VASAP employee, who already maintained a full-time position description. No case worker was dedicated to families in these homes.

The Department of General Services refurbished the homes to house as many as four families transitioning from the BAK.

Subsequently, these properties were found to have unsafe levels of lead and deemed uninhabitable. The families were forced to move out. The Board has recommended that these properties be remediated, so they can again be utilized for housing domestic violence victims. However, the Board was informed by DHHS Services to End and Prevent Homelessness that these properties will likely not be used to house domestic violence victims because there are not adequate case management resources in place. The Board was informed of this decision in Fall 2019.

BRIDGE HOUSING & CASE MANAGEMENT REQUEST

Priority 1: Bridge Housing for Victims of Domestic Violence

The Board continues to advise that there is a need to identify and earmark bridge housing options for domestic violence victims leaving BAK who do not possess the ability to secure a safe place to live. One-year bridge housing with case management services means that domestic violence victims would be given support to find: employment, job training, related childcare needs, financial resources, and permanent housing.

We are encouraged by the County's FY22 Operating Budget, which intends to expand the number of slots available in the Rapid Rehousing Program, including slots specifically designated for households fleeing domestic violence. However, we acknowledge that this is only a beginning effort to address this critical community need. The Board continues to actively seek funds, and to support all efforts to raise funds, for crucial case management services.

Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Continuum of Care (CoC) bonus funding for victims of domestic violence can be used to invest in more Rapid Rehousing for both families and individuals fleeing domestic violence. The Board also recommends that HUD CoC Domestic Violence bonus funding be requested in the Interagency Commission on



Homelessness (ICH) CoC Consolidated Application to HUD. To be included in the Application, a County service provider must agree to provide services and meet minimum requirements. In the past, service providers have not met these requirements and domestic violence bonus funding was not included in the ICH Consolidated Application to HUD. The Board believes that increased awareness of the grant writing process and qualification requirements would help service providers be more successful in the future. The Board asks that training be offered to potential service providers so that this important funding can be obtained for domestic violence survivor housing.

PRIORITY: FUNDING INCREASE AND EXPANSION OF SERVICES FOR DOMESTIC VIOLENCE OFFENDER GROUPS



GOALS

Trauma Services Abused Persons Program (APP) is focused on serving victims of intimate partner violence. Toward that end, APP offers domestic violence offender counseling groups through a contractor. These mandatory groups are ordered by the judicial system for offenders in the County.

Both before and during this reporting period, the VSAB has adhered to the following goals regarding this priority:

1. Additional staff funding for intensive individual therapy for high-risk offenders.
2. Funding for psychiatric medical assessments for medication, as appropriate.
3. Additional staff funding for the contractor to conduct intake and offer translation services.
4. Corresponding staffing increases to perform these enhanced efforts; and
5. All of the work to be done by the contractor.

The urgency of meeting these needs and fighting for these priorities has only become more evident during this reporting period because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

BACKGROUND

Priority: Funding Increase and Expansion of Services for Domestic Violence Offender Groups

APP domestic violence offender groups utilize a best-practice model for treatment of offenders with the goal of decreasing or eradicating recidivism. Through participation in these groups, offenders learn interventions that help them manage anger, communicate more effectively, and maintain more positive and healthier relationships. Most domestic violence victims want their abuse to stop and do not want to terminate their relationships. For these reasons, these groups are valuable for both parties.

FUNDING AND EXPANSION OF SERVICES

Priority: Funding Increase and Expansion of Services for Domestic Violence Offender Groups

Before this reporting period and throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, the Board has advised on funding of this program and expanding services as follows:

- ◆ We requested individual therapy funding for high-risk domestic violence offenders. Priority groups include offenders who have mental health issues, are at high-risk to re-offend, or use strangulation. This individualized treatment would help the offenders to address high-risk behaviors and lower or eliminate recidivism.

We requested funds for a psychiatrist to assess the medication needs of offenders. This addition would help make the DV offender program more comprehensive and improve its effectiveness.

FUNDING AND EXPANSION OF SERVICES

Priority: Funding Increase and Expansion of Services for Domestic Violence Offender Groups

The Board is grateful to report that the County issued a request for proposal (RFP #1110701) to expand the APP offender group's scope to align with that advised by the Board. Solicitation responses were evaluated, and this program was expanded in 2020 in part due to the Board's advocacy work supporting it.

PRIORITY:

INCREASED STAFFING FOR VICTIM SERVICES PROGRAMS

GOALS

Before this reporting period, the VSAB advocated for three (3) full-time victim assistants for HHS Trauma Services. A funding request of \$196,000 would have been required to address this priority. During this reporting period, however, the Board recognized the financial challenges confronting the County because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Accordingly, once the pandemic began, the Board initially advocated for at least maintaining current staffing levels for HHS Trauma Services (APP and VASAP).

Notwithstanding that situation, and realizing that the COVID-19 pandemic has, thankfully, not been as detrimental to County and State finances as initially expected, the Board continues to believe that additional [three (3)] full-time victim assistants are warranted. This belief is buttressed by the significant increase in demand for victim services during the pandemic. For example, when comparing 2019 and 2020 data, we see there has been a [91%] increase in Intakes. The severity of cases has also become more critical, with increases in homicides, domestic violence, sexual violence, and more strangulation reports.



BACKGROUND AND PRIORITY STATUS

Priority: Increased Staffing for Victim Services Programs

There is a need for more Trauma Services victim assistants (VAs) to staff the local Circuit and District Court courthouses in Rockville and Silver Spring. These assistants help crime victims within the courthouses, playing a critical role for all victims of crime. Trauma Services VAs are independent of the criminal justice system and are on the frontline in our courtrooms.



BACKGROUND AND PRIORITY STATUS

Priority: Increased Staffing for Victim Services Programs

They assist crime victims in filing peace and protective orders, accompany victims during trials, help develop victim impact statements, hold court school, assist in filing family emergency maintenance, attend show cause hearings for DV offenders, and connect victims to needed resources and to victims' services program. Currently, there are an insufficient number of VAs in the courts to meet the needs of victims. The unfortunate cuts have produced delays in processing compensation cases for crime victims and resulted in less court coverage in both Circuit and District courts, where crime victims seek immediate assistance.

Reported in 2019 by Court Watch Montgomery ("From 'Catch-22' to Equal Justice"), an independent court monitoring program, 46% of domestic violence victims did not have a lawyer or victim assistant at their final protective order hearing.

Having an advocate helps victims with determining final protective orders and guaranteed monitored exchanges of children with the noncustodial parent.

Advocates add good value in a County with budget constraints. According to the Court Watch report, the data show that in most cases advocates' impact is equal to that of lawyers in helping victims obtain orders and key provisions.

The Board is happy to report that funding for the Trauma Services Program has been maintained in the County Executive's FY22 operating budget. However, no increase in staffing is currently expected. The Board continues to believe such an increase is warranted, particularly considering the increased demand for victim services during the COVID-19 pandemic. We will continue to work with the County Council to advocate for these increased resources.

PRIORITY: POLICY CHANGE ON FORENSIC EXAMS FOR RAPE AND SEXUAL ASSAULT VICTIMS



GOAL

The VSAB continues to advocate for trauma-informed, patient-centered models to provide quality care and best practices for victims of sexual assault and rape.

BACKGROUND AND PRIORITY STATUS

Priority: Policy Change on Forensic Exams for Rape and Sexual Assault Victims

Forensic exams are essential after a rape or sexual assault to collect vital evidence and provide appropriate healthcare for victims. Most of these exams can be done at only one hospital in the County. Victims who go to other hospitals must transport themselves to this one location to obtain medical care, to gain access to best practices in rape kit examinations, and to benefit from best evidence collection for criminal prosecution. Self-transporting to a hospital can be a medical safety issue for victims who must also cope with psychological distress, physical pain, and the financial and temporal burden of traveling across the County. This is not reflective of a person-centered approach for victims of rape and sexual assault during a critical time. Currently, there are three additional satellite locations with enhanced forensic exam capabilities that do not create barriers for victims. Another model uses a revolving team of sexual assault forensic exam (SAFE) nurses who provide care at any hospital. Despite an incremental improvement in access to SAFEs, every hospital in the County should be able to provide forensic exams by specially trained nurses. A budget increase to expand upon this priority is needed in order to support increased County hospital forensic exams.

LEGISLATIVE AFFAIRS REPORT

The Board continued to expand its advocacy efforts, supporting legislation in the 2021 Maryland General Assembly that can improve the lives of crime victims. Board members worked virtually with several staff of Montgomery County Senators and Delegates. Many legislators in the Montgomery County Delegation have been outspoken leaders in initiating changes to improve the lives of victims of crime. The Board submitted testimony supporting seven bills during hearings before the Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee, Senate Budget and Taxation Committee, the House Judiciary Committee, and the House Appropriations Committee.

Among the Board's legislative priorities, laws were passed that:

- ♦ Prohibit law enforcement officials from engaging in sexual activity with individuals they are investigating or assisting, extending Maryland law that currently prohibits such activity with individuals who are in custody or incarcerated.
- ♦ Waive the publication requirement for an individual seeking a name change under Maryland Rule 15-901, allowing survivors of intimate partner violence to further conceal their identity for protection and survival; and
- ♦ Substantially increase Maryland Legal Services Corporation funding that finances civil legal services to indigent clients who rely on the legal services of non-profits that are supported by this funding, including those that assist victims with peace and protective orders and other related civil cases such as divorce, custody and child support.



Board-supported bills failed to move through the legislative process that would have:

- ♦ Repealed a criminal law that allows marriage to be used as a defense to some sex crimes where current law limits the circumstances under which people can be prosecuted for sexual violence against their spouses;
- ♦ Changed the process by which a Probation Before Judgment (PBJ) is entered, resulting in equal application of PBJs to state and federal law of a finding of no conviction, thereby eliminating the fear of deportation of non-citizens for victims who want to report violence by their partner;

LEGISLATIVE AFFAIRS REPORT

- ♦ Extended the Ignition Interlock System Program to apply not only to those individuals convicted of drunk driving, but also to first-time convicted drunk drivers who are given a Probation Before Judgment (PBJ); and
- ♦ Expanded the definition of regulated firearms to include certain unfinished frames or receivers, so called “do-it-yourself (DIY) or “ghost guns,” require that all firearms are marked with a unique serial number, and impose penalties for violations in the manufacturing, possessing, selling, and transferring of these firearms.

The Board appreciates the efforts and stewardship of several members of the Montgomery County Delegation to introduce these bills and to advocate for hearings on these critical issues, including Senators Susan Lee and Jeff Waldstreicher and Delegates Charlotte Crutchfield, Emily Shetty, Lesley Lopez, David Moon and Kathleen Dumais.

Written statements were also submitted to the members of the Montgomery County Council supporting Bill 4-21 regulating DIY or ghost guns and Bill 45-20 expanding police data reports on community policing. Bill 4-21 provides a definition of DIY or ghost gun and implements regulations to prohibit sharing the knowledge and availability of the materials needed to manufacture these firearms with underage individuals and other individuals who are disqualified from legally possessing a firearm. The Board appreciates the leadership of Vice President Gabe Albornoz in spearheading this effort; the legislation passed unanimously on April 6.

Bill 45-20 requires the Montgomery County Police Department (MCPD) to create and post certain reports regarding officer-community interactions on Data Montgomery. Councilmember Will Jawando is the lead sponsor for this bill. Its goal is to enhance the public’s knowledge of MCPD interactions with individuals. The bill requires that race and ethnicity be reported for a range of incidents, including those involving use of force, criminal citations including trespassing citations, alcohol beverage and marijuana violations and juvenile citations.

LEGISLATIVE AFFAIRS REPORT

The Board believes that Bill 45-20, in improving and expanding datasets regarding race and ethnicity, would promote racial equity and social justice by narrowing disparities affecting public safety.

Concerned with the unprecedented challenges brought on by the pandemic for Maryland's most vulnerable populations, the Board wrote to Governor Larry Hogan. We requested that the Governor make helping victims of crime a top priority when determining how to maximize the use of American Rescue Plan Act funds. The need for help for victims was evident by the number of cases referred to the Montgomery County HHS Victim Assistance and Sexual Assault Program (VASAP) and the Abused Persons Program (APP). These numbers almost doubled in one year from 2019 to 2020. The severity of these cases has become more critical, reflected in an increase in homicides, hate crimes, domestic violence, sexual violence, and strangulations. The needs of crime victims are further compounded by unemployment, evictions, and other financial losses.

The Board strongly advocated that a significant portion of state and local aid from the rescue plan be dedicated to helping crime victims by expanding victim services' programs like VASAP and APP as well as the victim services' program of the Montgomery County Police Department and corresponding programs in other jurisdictions. Access to temporary and permanent housing for victims of domestic violence is also critically needed. This federal aid is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to permanently improve the status quo for victims.

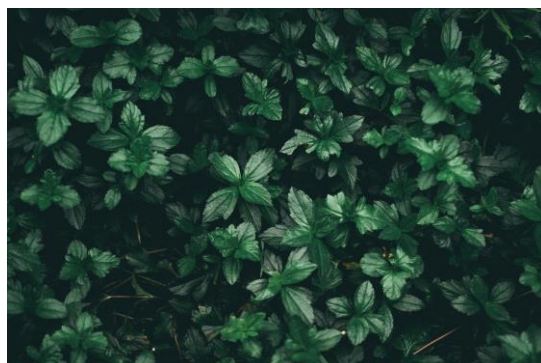


PUBLIC EDUCATION AND OUTREACH REPORT

The VSAB's Public Affairs, Education and Outreach subcommittee is charged with sharing the work of the Board with the Montgomery County community. Our mission is to keep the public abreast of items of interest regarding advocacy efforts, legislation, resources, and crime prevention. The subcommittee uses social media to spread awareness of its activities and the services available in the county and state. Members also attend community events to promote the work of DHHS Trauma Services and to educate the public about available programs and resources.

Over the past year, the subcommittee has increased its inclusion of food, housing, healthcare, and economic resources within our outreach, to meet the needs of the community throughout the pandemic. We have also increased the opportunities for "Calls to Action" where community members are welcome to join the advocacy efforts alongside board members and community organizations. Additionally, many of the board members' meetings with legislative officials and community leaders are shared via social media to raise awareness of our ongoing learning, collaboration, and advocacy efforts. Within this time, our social media followers increased by over 110%.

To learn more about us, please find us on Facebook at <http://www.facebook.com/Victim-Services-Advisory-Board-of-Montgomery-County-MD-240170336583329/>.



PUBLIC EDUCATION AND OUTREACH REPORT



Looking Forward to FY22 and FY23

Like everything else over the past year or more, this year's initiatives and priorities continue to be informed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Largely driven by the pandemic crisis, the demand for help from HHS Trauma Services has escalated. During the beginning of the pandemic, the program saw a 91% increase in service requests. For FY 21 and the beginning of FY22, the program has received 2,387 such requests. The severity of cases has become more critical, with an increase in homicides, domestic violence, sexual violence, and more reports of strangulations. In 2021, the County has experienced a record number of 35 homicides. Trauma services has provided help to the individual surviving family members.

Ensure HHS Trauma Services is Fully Staffed to Meet the Community's Needs

VSAB continues to evaluate the needs of HHS Trauma Services. Our research has shown that the program needs staffing assistance to keep up with the rise in crime and the community's demands. Enhancing the staffing levels and resources at Trauma Services has been a priority for VSAB for the past few years. VSAB is asking for additional staff and staffing adjustments to provide needed therapy, victim advocacy, and to build an intake unit. The overall goal of Trauma Services should be to meet the needs of our community. For too long, individuals have been required to fit into preexisting programs that may not meet their needs. We must design programs to ensure the County is partnering better across programs. Now, more than ever before, the increase in crime demands a more crisis-focused and timely delivery system.

Trauma Services is staffed with therapists and victim assistants. Specifically, when working with crime victims, the therapists' scope of work includes clinical intake, therapy, and case management. Therapists carry additional responsibilities too, including training and monitoring volunteers who assist sexual assault and IPV (intimate partner violence/domestic violence) victims at hospitals. Three additional therapist positions are needed to respond adequately to the substantial demand for counseling stemming from the increase in community crime. The therapists currently maintain caseloads of 30-40 people,

necessitating seeing 6-8 victims daily. This schedule leaves them very little time to maintain their clinical paperwork, document their work, perform intakes, and keep up with the other responsibilities that accompany the job.

Trauma Services also needs to convert two existing grant-funded part-time positions to full-time merit positions for victim assistants (VAs) to staff the local Circuit and District Courts in Rockville and Silver Spring, where victims seek immediate assistance. VAs play a vital role in helping crime victims. Trauma Services VAs are different from other VAs in the County because they are independent of the criminal justice system. Trauma Services VAs assist crime victims in filing peace and protective orders, hold “court school” to educate victims about what to expect when they come into court, accompany victims during criminal trials, help with victim impact statements and requests for family emergency maintenance, attend show cause hearings for DV (domestic violence) offenders, and connect victims to needed community resources and programs.

Trauma Services VAs are unique because they process County crime victim compensation cases and serve as the liaison for the State’s Criminal Injuries Compensation Board (CICB). To restore a crime victim to a pre-crime level of functioning, it is important to provide them compensation to reimburse their financial losses to the best of the County’s and the State’s ability. These claims help pay for medical bills, lost wages, funeral expenses, and property losses for income-eligible crime victims.

Past budget cuts have impacted VAs in adverse ways, placing additional burdens on them, which has in turn caused a delay in processing compensation claims, to the detriment of crime victims. This unfortunate trend is arising when need is growing. In FY21, the program received 1887 intake requests. For the first three months of FY22, the program has already received 500 intakes. The number of intakes has continued to increase. The establishment of an intake unit would relieve the current therapists and VAs of their intake duties, allowing them to focus on therapy and victim advocacy responsibilities, helping the entire system work more efficiently and effectively.

Funding one-year bridge housing and creating a system for prioritizing Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) victims' access to long-term housing has been a top priority for VSAB since FY 2014.

The County needs to establish a plan to ensure safe, one-year bridge housing to end homelessness for IPV victims so that they can become self-sufficient survivors. Many survivors of domestic violence who are discharged from the Betty Ann Krahne (BAK) shelter after the maximum 60-day stay there often need additional time to resolve their housing issues. They require assistance, through supportive case management services, to prepare to live independently. This one-year transition program can help break the cycle of violence and dependency, afford victims time to build needed life skills (e.g., GED/education, vocational training, parenting classes), provide increased trauma recovery and empowerment, and give survivors time to identify and secure appropriate long-term housing.

Finally, VSAB will continue to request that the Interagency Commission on Homelessness (ICH) provide guidance for applicants who wish to obtain DV bonus funding from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) as part of the Continuum of Care (CoC) grants. We are encouraged to see that Montgomery County is eligible to receive \$671,010 for a DV Bonus Project as part of the CoC 2021 Competition. We will monitor the success of this project for potential expansion with County funding.

Respond to Other Areas of Service Needs:

VSAB continues to assess a wide range of service needs of crime victims in the County. Among these are the needs to: increase the availability of and reimbursement for medical forensic exams for IPV victims; change the law applying to the victim compensation fund, expanding the amount given to victims from the \$2,500.00 established in 1988 to \$5,000.00; restore the Community Educator position in HHS Trauma Services; provide a better transportation option for individuals traveling to and from the Crisis Center; and better understand and respond to the service needs of victims of human trafficking, increased gun violence, and gang activity in the County.